Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 06-26-123
Week of June 26, 2006

ALBERTA FAMILY ESTABLISHES NEW CATTLE OPERATION IN SASKATCHEWAN (PART 1)

If the Chern family has landed near Stockholm, Saskatchewan, it is probably because of a mixture of good luck, intuitive decision-making, and the simple attractiveness of the destination for agricultural endeavours.

"We are a family with four kids," says Bruce Chern. "The youngest is five and the oldest is 12. We moved here in 2003. We used to run a business in Alberta, building self-loading and self-unloading round bale trucks. But we didn't want to run that business forever. We wanted to go more into ranching.

"We are from Smoky Lake, Alberta, an hour northeast of Edmonton. We were ranching there and ran about 300 cows. We found it was really tough to connect land—to block it. There wasn't much land for sale there, and what was for sale was overpriced for its production capability."

In 1998, Chern had to deliver a bale truck to Theodore, about 20 minutes northwest of Yorkton.

"It was late August. This was for a couple of producers who didn't have any kids and for whom succession would be an issue. They wanted to show me their land. I thought that I'd entertain that, so we went out and we toured the land. I just could not believe the topography. The rolling hills, the sloughs and the willow bluffs and the trees. I saw the black soil in between all of it and I thought 'Wow, this is cow topography with grain soil. What a perfect combination.'

"When I saw what that land produced, I thought this was a place that I was going to keep in the back of my mind."

In 2002, Bruce Chern found himself coming back again to the region, while in the process of selling the rights to his round bale truck business to a Manitoba company.

"I had to work at the Western Canada Farm Progress Show in June. Meanwhile, it was pretty much big time drought in Alberta already. We were looking around, and I went inside and all the real estate agents were lined up there. From my experience with bale trucks, usually the guys who buy these trucks are new to the market and are the real forward-thinking guys, and what they were telling me was if you can find land within a 45-minute radius of Yorkton, your chances of being very consistent as far as rainfall or soil and all that were good.

(more)

"I went to a real estate agent and I asked what they had for sale within a 45-minute radius of Yorkton. This is pre-BSE. They asked what kind of land I was looking for: grain land or ranch land. I said 'ranch land.' Well, they pulled up what they had available."

Chern was looking for 15 quarters at least, and closer to 20 if at all possible.

"There was nothing with anything near that. There was maybe something with old grass and worn out old fence, but everything was primarily grain soil. Some had grass. Being pre-BSE, there were too many zeros on the end of the price tag. I knew that if this stuff was being cropped right now, then it was ready to be seeded into grass. We would just fence it and manage it properly.

"I asked: 'what do you have for grain land? We need all that in a block.' They had a couple of blocks within that 45-minute radius. And 10 days later, I convinced my wife to make a little trip with me."

Together, Bruce and Patty Chern ran the math and budgeted how much it would cost to seed and fence the land.

"We drove out and looked at it and we were very satisfied with both packages. But one was much closer to a good school bus route and a lot of amenities, while the other was sort of right in the middle of three major centres and 40 kilometres from any of them. The choice was easy. We took the place that was closest for the bus ride.

"We drove home, talked some more. The economy was still strong on the grain side and the ranching side then. There was some pressure on this land we were interested in from other potential buyers. We came out a second time and we brought a couple of friends of ours. One had a plane and flew us out."

In the back of their minds, the Cherns figured there was no better way to make a decision about buying cropland than to take two people who had farmed all their lives, let them kick it around and see what they had to say about it.

"So they looked at it and they thought it was very adequate soil, which made our decision a little easier. We made a deposit on the land. We put our place up for sale in Alberta and there was a transition period of eight months. What was on the land was in its own growing season. It would soon be April and we'd take possession then."

This would give the family enough time to prepare for the big move to Saskatchewan.

(Continued in Part 2)

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ALBERTA FAMILY ESTABLISHES NEW CATTLE OPERATION IN SASKATCHEWAN (PART 2)

The journey of moving from one cattle operation in Alberta to establishing a new one from scratch in Saskatchewan can be strewn with obstacles. For the Chern family, it seems, good fortune was a reliable companion. Bruce Chern explains how their new ranch near Stockholm took shape.

"We sold our land in Alberta; bought the land here and we ended up putting in a lot of grass in 2003. It was a dry year and the catch wasn't as good as we had hoped for. There were grasshoppers. But, I am a very positive-minded person so I was not going to pout about it.

"One thing I did, because all the sloughs had dried up, is take advantage of the low rain situation to put in a fence. It is much easier to do when you can drive right through the sloughs. We got here in August and we fenced about 24 miles—a four-wire barbed wire perimeter fence that year."

The Cherns had sold their cows in December of 2002. They knew they were moving to a place with no fence or grass.

"We sold our entire cow herd, luckily before BSE, and we sold all our yearlings two weeks before BSE. So we were sitting out here building fences and seeding grass with no cows and money to buy cows. The cattle buyers in Alberta knew that, so they wouldn't stop phoning us with hot deals on cows when BSE hit. Every time we said no, the deals got sweeter. So we ended up buying back 600 cows during the course of BSE. They probably cost us what we got for the 300 that we sold in Alberta.

"It was just dumb luck. We paid the price in some ways, but we gained in other ways, so it all kind of washes. We have our own little block and we have 25 quarters here, and we are running 550 cows at the moment. We retain ownership of all our calves right through to slaughter, and we belong to a group called Prairie Heritage Producers. We mainly direct-market right now to one grocery store chain on Vancouver Island, and we're just coming on with more marketing avenues all the time."

So, what do the folks the Cherns know back in Alberta think of all this?

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"People ask us all the time: 'What is it like in Saskatchewan?' We answer: 'People are very friendly; the land does what we want it to do and more; and the climate is fine.' Remember that we came from northeast of Edmonton, so it is the same as here. Everybody thinks that people move in from southern Alberta, where the Chinook belt prevails. The rainfall is good here and the people are good.

"We try to be good community participants. Kids have adjusted to school and become involved in sports. The way we see Saskatchewan—and people tell us how they have shipped all their kids out—we say: 'if you can't make it ranching in Saskatchewan, you can't make it ranching anywhere else in the world, because where else can you buy grain-quality land with cow topography for cow-land prices that produces like this?' Growing conditions are great. The groundwater is incredible; the price of land and the availability is unparalleled."

To help them stay on top of things, Bruce Chern confides the family has linked up with other nearby producers.

"We make our own feed and we are engaged in holistic grazing. We are connected with positively minded people who want to move forward, challenge each other, and work together to make things better."

Chern shares that, just recently, a huge block of land sold just north of his place.

"A ranching group out of Alberta bought it, and they hired me to do the complete set up of that ranch as far as the grass establishment, the water system and the fencing; and it has been very good for us.

"We have water pipelines running throughout our entire ranch, and we seeded all the grass. A lot of people out of Alberta come around and tour out here. We show them what we have done, and some of the other guys show them what they have done, and they are absolutely impressed with this countryside and the horsepower of the growing conditions here, especially if we use legumes in our grazing stands. We are just sucking up the nitrogen out of the atmosphere and plugging it into the ground. Our cows are grazing alfalfa there. It has just supercharged the land, and the cows are just smoking on it. No government in the world has figured out how to tax that nitrogen bill yet. We are just jamming it in. If that isn't sustainable, I don't know what is."

Chern makes no bones about the future he envisions for agriculture on the Prairies.

"There are huge synergies going on here. The momentum had been absolutely negative. It is now shifting to absolutely positive. It is all on the verge of taking off. With the coming of ethanol and biodiesel, it creates a feeding industry, which will grow the slaughter industry, and that all will lead to value-added agriculture.

(more)

"Everybody looks at the price of oil as being a negative. I look at it as good because it is making everybody think. It is creating options. If you always hauled every load of wheat to the elevator, your options were limited. Sure, the boys in the '70s had it good, and the wheat prices were high when you were hauling it to the elevator, but that time is gone, and now is the time to move on. That is the way I look at it."

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OPTIMAL USE OF FLAX IN PIG DIETS EXPLORED AT THE PRAIRIE SWINE CENTRE

Researchers at the Prairie Swine Centre in Saskatoon are embarking on a research initiative involving flax use in swine production, funded by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's Agriculture Development Fund (ADF #20050724).

Dr. John Patience is with the Prairie Swine Centre.

"This involves taking a locally grown ingredient, i.e. flax, and taking advantage of a particular feature of flax seed - the oil content, and in particular, the unique fatty acid composition - which makes it rich in what is called Omega-3 fatty acids.

"These have been identified in human nutrition as desirable from a health point of view. You will see on the shelves in stores, for example, Omega-3 enriched eggs, or you can and buy tablets containing Omega-3-rich supplements. What this particular project seeks to do is to create pork which is also enriched with Omega-3 fatty acids, and thereby to create a pork product which can be segregated or identified on the store shelf as unique or special in its nutritive value or functional properties."

Dr. Patience points out that, long before his team submitted its application for research funding to ADF, it knew that it was possible to enrich pork with Omega-3 fatty acids.

"That research was done a long time ago. What we are doing with this four-year project is developing a template for how to most effectively feed flax to the pig in order to get the enrichment that is desired on a consistent basis at the optimum cost, and to do so in a manner that doesn't bring any undesirable characteristics.

"Over the next four years, we will be looking at methods of processing flax seed to best deliver the product to the pig. We will look at various combinations of how much flax, or fractions of flax seed, we would feed to the pig, and for how long, in order to consistently achieve this Omega-3 enrichment, so that we are providing a consistent and dependable product to the consumer marketplace."

(more)

Patience says his team would also carry out taste panel work and other evaluations of the final pork product, to make sure that it offers the same excellent flavour, texture and tenderness of conventional pork.

"We have to be careful when we feed a flax product like oil to pigs, so that we don't overdo it, because if you overfeed the product, it can result in soft fat, for example, which is undesirable from both a consumer point of view and from a processed pork point of view."

Surely, finding new opportunities for locally produced flax can only be beneficial for Saskatchewan producers.

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USING PESTICIDE PRODUCTS AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE KEY TO FARM SAFETY

In a world where environmental concerns and safety are increasingly central to our lives, it only makes sense to minimize risks of exposure to potentially harmful chemicals, especially on the farm.

Cameron Wilk is Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's Provincial Pesticides Specialist.

"The most important thing, if you must carry pesticide products on your farm, is to use it up as soon as possible after you acquire these products. They are expensive, and there are security issues around others wanting to steal these things. It is always best to use them up promptly."

Proper storage of pesticides on the farm is an important aspect of risk management. The trend towards increasing farm size and more intensive farming systems has increased the need for on-farm pesticide storage facilities. Regardless of farm size, any time chemicals are stored on site, security risks increase, along with risks to environment and human safety. This increased risk underscores the need for properly designed and sited chemical storage facilities.

"On-farm pesticide storage may take on many forms," according to Wilk. "They can be newly constructed buildings or compartments, renovated existing buildings and containers. Your own budget will dictate what solution works best on your farm. As you undertake to set up a pesticide storage facility, ask yourself the following question: Is the storage structure to be used as a single-use facility? Utilizing the building for storage of other farm inputs, equipment storage or a maintenance facility can defeat the purpose of a pesticide storage facility. As a safety precaution, you should not store food, feed, fertilizer or livestock medication with pesticides."

Wilk then suggests a review of the following:

"Can you access running water near the site in the event of a spill? Water is the most suitable means for personal decontamination at or near the storage area. Can the container or the shed be locked? Do you have protective clothing, a first aid kit and a respirator appropriate to the pesticide stored? Is the equipment properly maintained and working? Can the flooring contain spills or leaks? Is there a floor drain or catch basin? And where does any material go that enters the floor drain? Can the floor be readily cleaned and decontaminated of pesticides? Is there adequate ventilation to prevent the accumulation of toxic or flammable vapours? Do you have absorbent material to soak up a spilled pesticide? That material may include lime, coarse clay, sand and sawdust. Can you prevent liquid products from freezing during winter months?"

(more)

If your farm is in a location protected by a municipal fire department, you are required to provide a list of pesticides stored and estimated quantities on hand to the chief of the fire department, Wilk says. This is to be done semi-annually and whenever significant changes in inventories occur.

You will also be required to post a "Danger – Stored Pesticide" sign printed in block letters. The letters should be five centimetres or more in height and posted on each entrance.

Siting pesticide storage facilities is also an important consideration. These facilities should be in a low-traffic area away from residences, watercourses, and water intakes and wells used for domestic purposes.

Should your on-farm pesticide storage facility stock more than 2,000 kilograms of pesticides, additional requirements will come into effect under *The Hazardous Substances and Waste Dangerous Goods Regulations*.

"Your containers, where possible, if they are under the 23-litre size, should be triple-rinsed and returned to a container recycling program offered by the pesticide industry. If you are moving towards larger totes and shuttles, the manufacturers have their own return programs where they charge a significant deposit on those types of containers and they are returned to the point of sale so the manufacturer of that particular product can deal with the recycling of that container.

"Those producers who have to store product on-farm tend to be very aware of the environmental responsibilities. Current trends are towards the totes and shuttles with closed systems, where the applicator or the farm operator does not have to touch the product. They are equipped with special valves and pumping systems to transfer the product from their containers to the spray tanks. It is a much safer system."

If you require technical information about pesticide storage and handling, contact the Saskatchewan Agriculture Knowledge Centre at 1-800-457-2377.

Keep in mind that producers who have completed an Environmental Farm Plan through the Provincial Council of Agriculture and Diversification Boards (PCAB) can apply to the Canada Saskatchewan Farm Stewardship Program (CSFSP) for assistance in improving on-farm storage of pesticides. The CSFSP provides 30 per cent cost-shared funding up to a maximum of $15,000 for improved on-farm storage and handling of agricultural products. The program is restricted to non-commercial storage facilities only.

For further information about Saskatchewan's Environmental Farm Planning Program, contact your local PCAB facilitator listed on the PCAB website at www.saskpcab.com.

For further information about the CSFSP, contact Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Client Service Centre at 1-800-667-8567.

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RESEARCHERS DEVELOP NEW OAT VARIETY FOR THE RUMINANT FEED MARKET

Scientists at the University of Saskatchewan are looking into the development of a new variety of oat specially bred for the feed market, according to Dr. John McKinnon of the Department of Animal and Poultry Science.

"The Crop Development Centre has developed a new variety of oat. Currently, it is referred to as Low Lignin Hull High Oil Groat (LLH-HOG). That description encompasses its unique characteristics. You see, normally 20 to 25 per cent of the oat is comprised of the hull. The hull is typically high in lignin, which contributes to low digestibility, and thus, a lower energy value for oat relative to barley for ruminants.

"Cattle just don't gain as well on normal oat as they do on barley because of the hull's high lignin content. This new variety still has as much hull as other oats, but it is more digestible—more useable as an energy source."

The second component of this variety is the high-oil groat. The groat is the actual seed once the hull has been removed.

"The oil or fat content of the groat in this new product is slightly greater than eight per cent, whereas typical varieties only average five per cent. So it is a significant improvement in oil content. The higher the oil content, the more potential energy is available to the animal. The Crop Development Centre has focused on developing this line of oat with low lignin and high oil, and the Department of Animal and Poultry Science is where we looked at how it could be used in beef and dairy feeding."

This research effort is the fruit of the work of a number of participants, McKinnon explains. Specific funding came from Super Oats Canada and Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food's Agriculture Development Fund, as well as from the University of Saskatchewan.

"The crop breeding work has been done by the Crop Development Centre at the University of Saskatchewan, particularly Dr. Brian Rossnagel. In the Department of Animal and Poultry Science, the work has been done by Dr. David Christensen, Vern Racz of the Prairie Feed Resource Centre, and I. There are also two graduate students working on the project.

(more)

"We have carried out studies on backgrounding calves using the facilities at the university feedlot in Saskatoon and at the Western Beef Development Centre in Lanigan. We looked at a finishing trial, where we compared this new oat to barley and corn. The results of the backgrounding study were particularly interesting. We found that cattle fed either the oat-based or a barley-based diet showed similar intakes and delivered equal performance in both average daily gain and feed conversions."

The oat-fed cattle in the backgrounding period gained every bit as much as the barley-fed cattle, says McKinnon, which indicates that this would be a product that would fit very nicely in backgrounding diets.

"The important part of this is that, agronomically, when you look at oat relative to barley or other cereals, the input costs aren't as high. As well, with this new variety, you are still getting the benefit of oat's typical high yield. So it is cheaper to grow this new line of oat than barley, and producers are getting the same performance with backgrounding cattle.

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